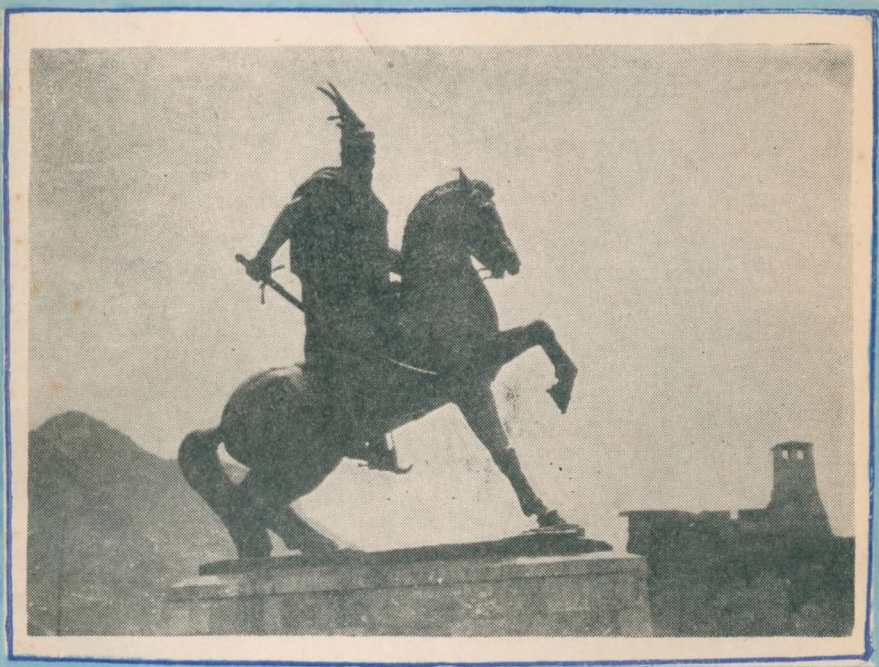
Kristo Frashëri



GEORGE KASTRIOTI

Scanderbeg

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GEORGE KASTRIOTI–SCANDERBEG

THE NATIONAL HERO OF THE ALBANIANS

(1405 - 1468)

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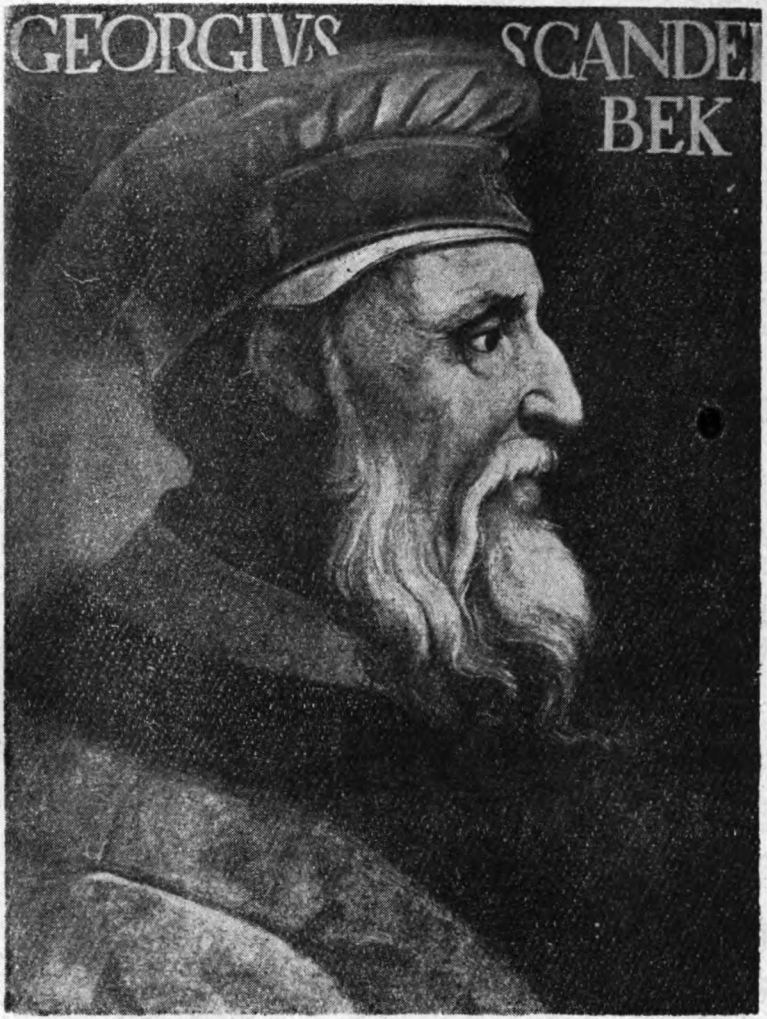
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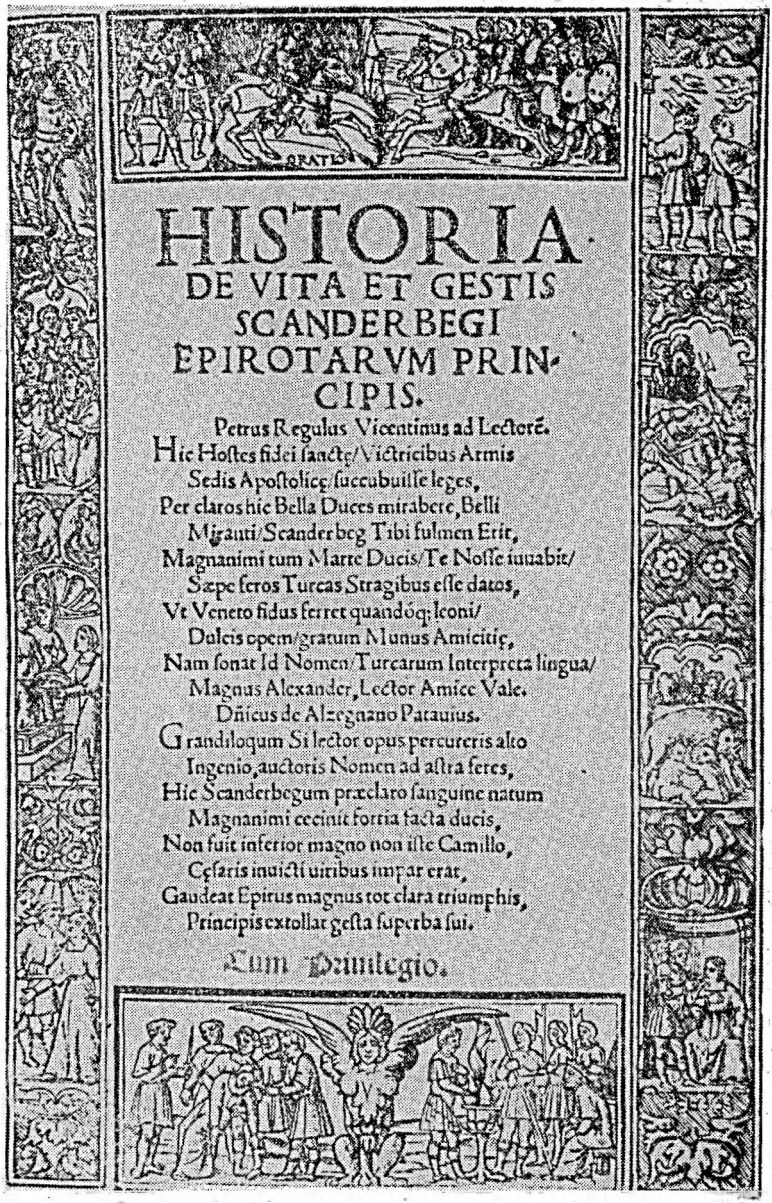
INTRODUCTION

The life and exploits of George Kastrioti, alias, Scanderbeg, the national hero of the Albanians. are linked with one of the most glorious periods of the century-long history of Albania. They are likewise linked with one of the most critical moments of European Mediaeval History, with that gloomy period when the Ottoman Turks, having subjugated the peoples of the Balkan Peninsula, were marching upon Central and Western Europe under the leadership of two of their most renowned Sultans, Murat II and Mohamed II.

In the XVth century, when Scanderbeg lived and worked, his homeland, Albania, and the peninsula where this small mountainous Balkan country was situated, writhed under the sway of the Turkish Janissaries whose sabers spread terror and panic throughout the land. Having overrun the greater part of Asia Minor these bands of daring warriors, with light arms and skillful on their horses, had crossed the Dardanelles as early as 1354 and having left behind them Constantinople, the capital of the worn out Byzantine Empire, had continued their onrush on the Balkans. The peoples of the Peninsula, that is, the Albanians, Bulgarians, Greeks, Servians and Wallachs, though at strife with one another and led by quarrelsome feudal chieftains, took up arms but were unable to check the Turkish avalanche. Taking advantage of the feudal anarchy that gnawed at the very foundations of the petty Balkan States, the Ottoman Turks scored success after success during the second half of the XIVth century. In 1361 they occupied Adrianople and, in the subsequent years, parts of Bulgaria

and Greece. They defeated a coalition of Servian feudal chiefs along the Maritsa river in 1371, occupied Macedonia in 1373, Sofia in 1388, pushed their boundaries to the Danube and Morava rivers in 1389 and, in 1389, they defeated the first and last important All-Balkanic coalition in the internecine battle of Kosova between the Turks under Sultan Murat I and troops from all the peoples of the Peninsula: Albanians, Bulgarians, Hungarians, Poles, Serbs and Wallachs. By the end of the XIVth century the greater part of the Balkan Peninsula had fallen into their hands. Albania, though partly occupied, shared the same fate at the end of the century.

During the first part of the XVth century the advance of the Turks was halted as a result of their defeat at Angora and the rivalry battles between Sultan Bayazed Yolderim's sons for the throne. But this halt, of which the Balkan peoples and the neighboring threatened States did not take advantage, was temporary. Having settled their internal political crisis, the Turks rebegan their military campaigns with a vengence in 1415. The Albanian cities and towns fell one after the other into the hands of the Janissaries and Spahis during the years following. Under Sultan Murad II, enthroned in 1421, the Ottoman Turks pursued their campaign with might and main towards Hungary with a view to breaking in upon Central Europe making no secret of their intention to cross over to Italy through Albania some future day. The Turks became a real menace to Europe when they organized their State on a military feudal basis with the possibility of throwing on the field innumerable fresh legions. In 1440 this threat created panic among the free peoples as well as among the subjugated people who had not lost all hope of getting rid of the Janissaries and Spahis. Although the European States realized that the Turkish onslaught could only be checked by combined action of their armed forces they nevertheless continued to be riven with selfish and political rivalry. Some of them went so far as to turn a deaf ear on what was happening in southeastern Europe and even tried to take advantage


HISTORIA
DE VITA ET GESTIS
SCANDERBEGI
EPIROTARVM PRIN-
CIPIS.
Petrus Regulus Vicentinus ad Lectorē.
Hic Hoſtes fidei ſanctę/Victricibus Armis
Sedis Apoſtolicę ſuccubuiſſe leges,
Per claros hic Bella Duces mirabere, Belli
Miranti/Scanderbeg Tibi fulmen Erit,
Magnanimi tum Marte Ducis/Te Noſſe iuuabit/
Sæpe feros Turcas Stragibus eſſe datos,
Vt Veneto fidus ferret quandóq; leoni/
Dulcis opem/gratum Munus Amicitię,
Nam ſonat Id Nomen/Turcarum Interpreta lingua/
Magnus Alexander, Lector Amice Vale.
Dñicus de Alzegnano Patauius.
Grandiloqum Si lector opus percureris alto
Ingenio, auctoris Nomen ad aſtra feres,
Hic Scanderbegum præclaro ſanguine natum
Magnanimi cecinit fortia facta ducis,
Non fuit inferior magno non ille Camillo,
Cęſaris inuicti uiribus impar erat,
Gaudeat Epirus magnus tot clara triumphis,
Principis extollat geſta ſuperba ſui.
Cum Priuilegio.

The cover of the first book about Scanderbeg from the biographer Marinus Barletius, Scutari humanist, published in Venice, between the years 1508-1510.

of the occasion and reap profits for themselves to the detriment of the states threatened by the Ottoman Turks. Nearly no State seemed to be willing to come to the aid of those engaged in the fighting with the Turks. Each state tried to shove the burden of the conflict away from itself on the shoulders of others. The European States would only fight against the Turks when the latter came to their boundaries. This, of course, made it easier for the Turks to attain their goal by defeating their opponents one after the other in single combat. The European States as such seemed to be unable to check the avalanche of the Ottoman Turks.

But during these critical years, when the liberty of the people and the magnificent culture of the Renaissance were at stake, two countries offered courageous resistance to the Turkish invaders and temporarily checked their advance to give the other states time to prepare to fight with more success against the Ottoman Empire.

Hungary was one of these countries. Under the able leadership of their renowned captain Janosh Hunyadi the Hungarians together with the other neighboring peoples marked a decisive turn in the war against the Turks. From an entirely defensive war waged by the Hungarian feudal chiefs, a war unlikely to forestall the treat on the country's frontiers, the Hungarians were led by Hunyadi into an offensive war to drive the Turks away from their boundary and oust them from the Balkans. The Hungarians did not manage to expel the Turks from the Balkans but, thanks to the magnificent assaults launched in 1442, the immortal hero Hunyadi brought the advance of the Turks towards Central Europe to a standstill.

Albania was the other country to offer courageous resistance to the Turkish invaders. A year later the Albanians led by their brilliant captain George Kastrioti, alias Scanderbeg, launched a general uprising, ousted the Turkish garnisons and freed their country, established their independent Albanian State and for tens of years at a stretch defended their country and obliged the Ottoman Sultans to maintain a standing army of considerable numbers in Alba-

nia for a considerably long time. Thus, by harrasing the Turks and scoring victory after victory against them, the Albanians helped, on one hand the Hungarians to wage an easier and more decisive war and checked and delayed the onrush of the Turks on the Italian Peninsula on the other.

ALBANIA AND THE ALBANIANS

In the XVth century just as at present the term Albania is applied to the westernmost region of the Balkan Peninsula inhabited by Albanians speaking a language quite different from those of the other peoples living in the neighborhood or elsewhere in the world. To the west the Albanian territory is washed by the waters of the Adriatic Sea which the Arabs of the Mediterranean region in the middle ages called **Gavn al Banadiqsh** and which separates Albania from the Italian Peninsula, to the south Albania was bounded by the land of the Greeks, to the east by that of the Bulgarians and to the north by that of the Servians. Less than a million Albanians lived in the territory of Albania on the eve of the Turkish invasion.

As to the origin of the Albanians many legends and hypotheses have been circulating not only during the middle ages but also in modern times. It has been claimed that the Albanians are the descendants of the Pellasgians, of the Illyrians, of the Thracians and of the Macedonians who had inhabited the Balkan region in the days of antiquity. It has likewise been claimed that the Albanians have come down from the Caucasus where a people bearing the name Albanian have actually been living since the early days of the new era. Others claim that they have come from other regions of Asia during the period of the migration of peoples in the IVth, Vth and VIth centuries. These are hypotheses with no accuracy. They are mere legends. Scientific research has established the fact that the Albanians are descendants of the ancient Illyrians who lived in the same territory as early as the time of the Homeric legends. The Albanian language is an offspring of the Illyrian

into which, it is beyond of all doubt that foreign words, including Arabic, have easily penetrated as a result of contact with other peoples throughout thousands of years. The Illyrians were divided into major and minor tribes bearing various names. One of these tribes is mentioned by Ptolemeus, an Egyptian geographer of Alexandria in the II century under the name **Albanoi** which name was applied to all the descendants of the Illyrians during the later middle ages. As a matter of fact the **Alb (Albanoi, Albanense)** version has been used and is continued to be used only by foreigners, whereas the Albanians themselves have used the **Arb (Arban, Arber)** version. The Byzantians adopted the Albanian version modifying it to **Arvanitoi** and the Arabs and Turks received it from the Byzantians and used the form **Arvanid** which by metathesis became **Arnaud.**

The Illyrians formed their states before our era. But during the IInd century before our era the Illyrians were conquered by the Romans who held sway over them for a number of centuries at a stretch. By the end of the IVth century of our era, when the Roman Empire was divided into the Eastern and the Western Empires, Albania made part of the former, or the Byzantine Empire. This was a period of unrest. It reeked with internal strife and attacks from abroad.

Towards the end of the XII century the Albanians formed their first mediaeval state in and about the territory comprising central Albania of the present. The rulers of the principality of Arberia, especially Grand Duke Demeter, came to terms with the other neighboring states. But this principality was short lived. A quarter of a century later (1191-1216) it fell into the hands of the Despot of Epirus who ruled the neighboring state to the south. Later on, about the middle of the XIII century, the coastal cities of southern Albania were turned over as a dowry to Manfred Hohenstaufen of Sicily who brought over to Albania German, Italian and Arab soldiers. Manfred who had been killed in 1266 was replaced by King Charles of the French ruling house of Anjou. In 1272 Charles d'Anjou, King of

Naples, was also proclaimed King of Albania. In 1286 the Anjouians were driven away from Albania and three quarters of a century of strife followed after that. Albania was first attacked by the Byzantians and then by the Servians; the Byzantians attacked it later again and the Anjuians followed afer that and the Servians attacked it again.

Feudal relations were spread throughout during these centuries. But by the XIVth century these conditions had not yet spread to the mountainous regions of the interior. These regions constituted independent communities of free peasants divided into tribes and clans that administered their affairs through their own councils. Feudal relations had spread throughout the lower coastal regions and the valleys and plains of the interior. These were the most advanced regions of the country. The land here belonged to the nobles and the petty feudal chieftains. The land was tilled by serfs and bondslaves. Farming was well advanced and farm crops were partly sold by the landlords in the flourishing cities of the Adriatic and the Mediterranean and even as far away as in the coastal towns of Egypt and Syria. These advanced regions contained many flourishing cities and seaports. The biggest city and main seaport of the country was Durres, founded during the VIIth century before our era, a city of great economic impetus and the most important political center of Albania of the middle ages. Shkodra in the north and Vlora in the south were next in importance. Ulqini in the north was noted for its daring seamen. The dwellers of these cities engaged in handicraft and their beautiful productions were far famed. Culturally these people were well advanced but like elsewhere in Europe their culture was under the influence of the Church. The Albanians were Christians but unlike elsewhere they were divided into Catholics under the Roman Church in the north and Orthodox under the Church of Constatinople in the south.

Towards the middle of the XIVth century they were again liberated from foreign domination. The more powerful feudal lords formed their own feudal states. The prosperity of these feudal petty states had created the economic and social

conditions for amalgamating them into a larger more stable formation to further the historic development of the country. This process of unification was carried out through much petty warfare both in Albania as well as in the Balkan countries of the neighborhood. These long and assiduous wars brought chaos throughout the country. The domains of the weaker feudal lords were incorporated into those of the more powerful ones. During the period extending from 1360 to 1370 this process led to the creation of three relatively large principalities, one in the north with Shkodra as its headquarters and under the rule of the Ballshaj, the other in central Albania with Durres as its capital under the rule of the Thopiaj and the third in the south with Arta as its capital under the rule of the Shpataj. But when this process of concentrating these feudal principalities into one strong, united Albanian State was at its height the Ottoman Turks made their appearance along the boundaries of Albania.

TURKISH OCCUPATION OF ALBANIA

The Turks made their first appearance in Albania in the year 1385 and took part in the struggle for supremacy between the Ballshaj and the Thopiaj siding with the latter. But their stay here this time was of short duration. They plundered the country and left the same year. Three years later in 1388 they returned towards Durres as the objective of their conquest. But events in Kosova obliged them to withdraw again, while the defeat of the Balkan coalition at the famous Battle of Kosova gave the Turks an opportunity to spread their rule over all the Balkans including Albania. Just as elsewhere the Turks took advantage of the interior squabbles of the local chieftains and subjugated them one after the other without much trouble. But although they conquered them the Turks did not establish their feudal military rule in Albania this time either. They let the local rulers exercise authority provided they recognized the sovereignty of the Sultan, they paid him a definite

yearly ransom and they served in his army when the Turks were at war.

Another foreign power, the Republic of Venice, took advantage of the feudal strife and the panic at the approach of the Turks and hastened to capture the commercial towns of the eastern coast of the Adriatic before the latter would fall into the hands of the Ottoman Turks. Through bribes and political pressure they managed to wrest these cities from the local rulers: Durrës, Shkodra, Lezha, Ulqini, Drishta etc. Between the claws of the Turkish invaders from the east and the Venetians from the west the Albanian principalities crumbled to pieces and at the end of the XIVth century Albania was politically in the same condition it had been during the middle part of that century.

After their defeat at Ankara (1402) and during the period of internal conflicts for the title to the Turkish throne, the Turks loosened their grip on Albania. But this relaxation was only temporary and on the eastern front alone for the Venetian commercial patricians continued to sow dissension among the Albanian chieftains so that they might more easily suck the marrow of the economic life of Albania. Having settled their home squabbles the Turks launched a new attack upon Albania. In 1415 they captured Kruja which they named Akche Hissar (The White Fortress) in central Albania and with the capture in 1417 of Vlora, Kanina and Berat, the mediaeval city of Belgrad which the Turks called Arnaud Beligrad and with the capture in 1419 of the citadel of Gjirokastra they completed the occupation of southern Albania, ousted the local chiefs and replaced them with their Spahis. In 1423 Sultan Murat II himself came at the head of his army to central Albania and stationed strong garrisons in the cities and fortresses but allowed the local chiefs to hold their lands as vassals of the Sultan.

These campaigns damaged Albania both politically and economically. They stripped Albania of its wealth both through the annual ransom extorted by the Turks as well as the plundering trade of the Venetians. Under the pressure of the Turks and the Venetians the Albanian principalites were

weakened and finally overcome. The most outstanding of these principalities were situated in the interior regions of the country mostly mountainous with a population made up of serfs and of free peasants possessing warlike traditions. During the twenties of the XVth century the three most powerful of these principalities were those of Dukagjini, Kastrioti and Araniti in northern and central Albania. Inspite of their strength the rulers were compelled to accept vassalage to the Sultan probably because they could see no alternative to maintain their possessions and independence under the impending danger of the Turks from the east, of the Venetians from the west and at the same time from the internal disputes between one another. When the Turks waged war against Venice in 1428 the Albanian leaders did not size up the situation in one and the same way. Hoping for a defeat of the Turks some of them placed themselves at the head of the peasant masses and considering the Turks as their irreconciliable foes, took up arms against the Sultan and sided with the Republic of St Mark. One of them was John Kastrioti, Prince of Mati and Dibra. The others among whom the Dukagjinis and Aranitaj did not break their relations with the Turks.

The Turks came off victorious from their conflict with the Venetians. In 1430 the victorious Sultan dispatched his armed forces against the regions of Albania and Morea which had sided with the Venetians. John Kastrioti was defeated and his forts were either razed to the ground or taken over by the Turkish garrisons, his principality was maimed and most of his domains were annexed by the Sultan. John was reduced to vassalage and his domains consisted only of a small part mostly mountainous.

The Turks established at this time their own feudal military regime (the feudal system of fiefs). They united these domains into one single adminitrative feudal department which they called the **Sandjak of Albania** (Sandjak of Arvanid later of Arnaud). This province included the lands formerly under the rule of the Kastrioti and the Aranitaj. In 1431 the Sultan ordered a census to be taken of the lands of the

peasantry in order to place them under the feudal spahis. After registration and when the spahis came over to assume lordship over these lands, the peasants of the principality of the Aranitaj took up arms and drove the spahis away. Thus when the isolated resistance of John Kastrioti was suppressed the Turks were faced with an armed uprising headed by George Araniti. The peasants fought with heroism and George Araniti reaped some brilliant successes against the Turkish army. But this uprising too was suppressed, just as a number of other isolated uprisings in the various parts of the country.

There is no gainsaying the fact that the Turks were superior in numbers, armaments and organization. But there are other reasons why these uprisings were suppressed. They had been spontaneous local uprisings unconnected with one another, and at a time when all forces should have been mustered against the powerful Turks and the war of the Albanians should have been combined with the wars of all other countries vanquished or about to be vanquished by the Turks. Besides these wars were led by feudal lords whose main objective was to safeguard their own petty interests rather than the interests of the peasant masses who bore the brunt of the struggle. The nobles were eager to free themselves from Turkish domination but feared, at the same time, that by the departure of the Turks other nobles might get stronger. They failed to grasp as yet the historical task lying before the country: the task of replacing the separation and feudal chaos with a concentrated Albanian State.

To the far-sighted men of the times it was now clear that an Albanian war for national liberation against so formidable an enemy as the Turks would be crowned with success only if all human reserves, economic resources and financial means of the country were mustered together, if the general uprising launched against the Turks were carried out to the end, if the leadership of the war of liberation were concentrated into one single direction, if the active participation in this war of all the broad masses of the population were secured by connecting this war with the protection of their fundamental interests, only if a people's

army with loyal cadres determined to undergo all kinds of hardships and sacrifices and if international allies joined in to counterbalance the numerical superiority of the Turks.

These critical military and political problems began to be solved one by one when the brilliant leader and strategist George Kastrioti, alias Scanderbeg, took the reins of state into his hands in Albania.

GEORGE KASTRIOTI SCANDERBEG

As noblemen the Kastrioti did not boast of a long line of ancestors. They were Albanians from the village of Kastrioti in the Hasi district in the northeastern part of the present Albania. During the second half of the XIVth century, when Albanian principalities were flourishing, Pal Kastrioti, a minor feudal lord, came down from his home village and settled in the Dibra region where his domain included only two villages. Pal's son, John Kastrioti, started his political career towards the end of the XIVth century when the Turks spread their sway over the territory of Albania. At the beginning he accepted the vassalage of the Turkish Sultan. But when the authority of the Turks dwindled at the beginning of the XVth century John broke the bonds of vassalage and taking advantage of the inner strife of the feudals, extended the range of his domains to Dibra and later to Mati and the regions lying west to the Adriatic shore. To withstand the pressure of the Turks John struck up friendship with Venice. But as the Republic of Venice had no intention of entering into conflict with the Turks for his sake John became the vassal of the Sultan again in 1410 and sent his elder son, Stanish, as a hostage of loyalty to him. Later on Stanish was set free and John pursued an independent policy of consolidating and extending his domain. But the year 1423 brought about a sudden aggravation of his situation. Sultan Murat II compelled John to give him further and greater guarantees if he intended to keep his do-

mains. And John Kastrioti the Prince of Dibra and Mati sent the Sultan at Adrianople three of his four sons as hostages of loyalty. (Raposhi, the fourth son, had been confined in a monastery).

George was the youngest of the three sons. He had been born in and about 1405 and was 18 years of age when he was turned over as a hostage to the Sultan. Stalwart and handsome, as the Turkish chronicler describe him, George made a hit at the royal court at Adrianople. As the son of a vassal the Sultan sent him to school at the palace and he was converted to Islam being christened Skander. George's biographers say that he graduated the military school with brilliant marks. In 1426 we find him again in Albania but his whereabouts during the subsequent years remained a secret. Of course he was held as a hostage at the court and as a soldier he was obliged to take part in various usual Turkish expeditions. He made a name for himself in these expedtions which won for him the title of beg, Scanderbeg, and the Sultan's favor. Taking advantage of this favor he was named the chief of the Kruja region by Sultan Murat II's decree.

Kruja, a strong mediaeval castle, was the center of the westernmost district of the sandjak of Albania. As chief of the district it was his duty to supervise the activities of the spahis and to watch what was happening round and about in the direction of Venice, the Dukagjinis and his father's domains in Mati. But although Scanderbeg did not like his job as a gendarm of the Sultan he remained in Kruja awaiting the occasion to carry out his duty as savior of his people with success. This task demanded long and careful preparation. He sought contact with the various leaders of the country. Through his father he came into contact with the Republics of Venice and of Ragusa who promised him support and friendship.

In 1440 Scanderbeg was sent as head of the sanxhak in Dibra. Here he continued his preparations and entered into agreement with other foreign states especially with Naples and Hungary. The popular masses were as ready as ever to

The statute of Scanderbeg, from Odhise Paskali.

The wife of Scanderbeg.

take up arms against the Turks. The Turkish invaders with their strange customs and speaking a strange tongue, ruthless in their conduct and unjust in their demands and of a different religion were irreconciliable social foes to the Albanian peasants and particularly to the free mountaineers. Under their feudal military system the Janissaries and the Turkish spahis had behaved themselves intolerably during the various campaigns against Albania. They had ransacked towns and villages, they had turned the country into a wasteland, they had killed and they had led people, men and women and children, into slavery and had sold them as slaves in distant lands. They had deprived mothers of their young boys in order to swell the ranks of the Jannissary army. The Turks had extorted heavy ransoms and had levied heavy offending taxes on the peasants. They were reducing the free mountaineers to serfdom.

Although ready to take up arms, although the peasants begged the Dibra sandjak to lead them to war against the Turks, Scanderbeg made no move. He was awaiting the appropriate moment, the favorable international situation for action. These conditions became ripe in the autumn of the year 1443.

THE GENERAL UPRISING (1443) AND THE LEZHA CONVENTION (1444)

Led by Janosh Hunyadi the Hungarians launched their attacks on the Turks in 1442. Their initial success encouraged them to keep up the struggle. Hunyadi planned to launch an attack on a larger scale and drive the Turks further away from their boundary the following year. In order to increase his chances for success Hunyadi tried to get in touch with the peoples of the Balkan countries. The Pope in alliance with the Hungarians exerted continuous pressure on the Balkan and Albanian leaders to take up arms against the Turks as soon as the Hungarians started their drive towards the south. A similar suggestion was made to Scanderbeg. To all appearances the moment seemed propitious. Fear of the

Hungarian offensive had compelled the Sultan to station the bulk of his army along the Danube. The Turkish garrisons in Albania had been depleted.

This was good news for Scanderbeg who was at the front with his own cavalrymen.

Since he found the Dibra people ready for revolt, Scanderbeg tried to take hold of the fortresses of the country, before their garrisons could get any reenforcements. The fortress of Kruja held a key-position in the system of Turkish garrisons in this part of Albania. It was situated on a strategic point that made it hard to take by frontal attack. After a short stay in Dibra Scanderbeg and his men continued on their way to Kruja and once here he produced a trumped up decree of the Sultan and became master of the city and citadel without shedding one drop of blood. He led his men into the city during the night from a nearby forest where he had stationed them the day before and with the help of a large number of loyal citizens attacked and exterminated the Turkish soldiers making up the garrison of the city.

This attack was the beginning of the great general armed uprising of the Albanian people against the Turkish invaders under the leadership of George Kastrioti Scanderbeg. Days later Scanderbeg himself took the torch of revolt to the Mati region which until 1440 when John Kastrioti had died, had been ruled by his father. Acclaimed everywhere as their leader Scanderbeg returned to Kruja on November 27 and on November 28, 1443 he proclaimed the reestablishment of the free Albanian Principality by hoisting on the white citadel of Kruja, the flag of the Kastrioti - a two-headed eagle on a red background, which is still the national flag of Albania.

The readiness of the popular masses enabled Scanderbeg to raise an army of Albanian volunteers in quite a few days. Taking advantage of the continuous march of the Hungarian armies, he occupied a number of fortresses of central Albania by the end of December, 1443. By that time he had become master of the citadels of Petrela, Petresha, Stalushi, Torna-

Scanderbeg in front of the Albanian fighters according to an engraving of the XVI century.

çi and somewhat later he occupied the important fort of Sfetigrad on the Albanian - Macedonian frontier which now became the Albanian-Turkish frontier. But these were only initial acts. The task of liberating the entire country and of protecting the liberated areas and principalities from the expeditions that the Turks would undoubtedly undertake once their war with Hungary was over, confronted the Albanians and particularly Scanderbeg on whom the brunt of responsibility for the future of the country evolved. To cope with the situation it was necessary to organize an Albanian army and to maintain this army it was necessary to find the financial means. In order to solve this problem and to urge the other Albanian leaders to take up arms to liberate the whole country as well as to defend it against the eventual expedition of the Turks, Scanderbeg summoned a general convention of all the Albanian leaders. The preliminary arrangements were made during the early months of 1444. The Albanian leaders who had full confidence that the victorious onslaught of the Hungarian armies would drive the Turks away from the Balkans, showed readiness to take part in this convention. Lezha which had long passed into the possession of the Venetians was chosen as the place of this convention and thus eliminate any misgivings on the part of the Venetian Republic as well as of the pretentious nobles.

The Convention began its sittings on March 2, 1444. Almost all the Albanian nobles including the leaders of the former uprisings against Turkish domination, such as George Arani'ti, Andrea Thopia, Nikolla Dukagjini, Theodor Korona - Muzaka took part in this convention. Representatives of the free Albanian mountaineers were also present. Guided by the common interest of defending the country against the intolerable Ottoman yoke the Albanian noblemen set aside their divergences and decided unanimously to combine all the Albanian forces to liberate and defend the fatherland. In connection with this task the Convention drew up «The Albanian League» to be headed by Scanderbeg. This was a kind of political and military alliance of the Albanian nobility

in their war against the Turks. The Lezha Convention decided the creation of an Albanian army under the supreme command of Scanderbeg. This army would be made up of the contingents recruited by each member of the League according to his ability and to meet the expenses the Convention decided to set up a common fund to be formed by the contributions of each member of the League. Each member promised the Convention the number of soldiers and the sum of money each would be sending to the League. Scanderbeg pledged his word that he would recruit the bulk of his army from his own domains.

Both Venice and Ragusa were invited to send their delegates to the Convention with a view of securing their aid. Ragusa failed to respond to the invitation while Venice sent only an observer. It was to the interest of the Republic to set up an anti-Turkish coalition in Albania but it was reluctant to end the peace it had struck up with the Sultan as far back as 1430, and preferred to adopt a policy of wait and see.

The establishment of the Albanian League marked an importat turn not only in the outcome of the wars against the Turks but also in the political history of Albania of the middle ages. For a free Albania would certainly lay the basis for a concentrated Albanian State in place of the petty feudal domains in existence. Therefore the general uprising of November 1443 and the Lezha Convention of the Albanian chieftains in March 1444 inaugurated an important period of the history of Albania, the period of the great Albanian - Turkish War which is characterized, on one hand by the marvellous military victories over the Turks and the political victories over the feudal chaos and for the consolidation of the free independent Albanian State on the other. The author of these brilliant victories were the Albanian people themselves under the able political and military genius George Kastrioti S c a n d e r b e g .

THE INITIAL TRIUMPHS OF THE ALBANIANS (1444 - 1450)

No one doubted that the Turks would rush on the revolting Albanians as soon as they saw it fit to do so. Therefore Scanderbeg devoted his first attention after the conclusion of the Lezha Convention to the speedy organization of the Albanian armed forces and to other defensive measures. It was plain right at the start that Scanderbeg did not intend to set up an army made up of mercenary bands or irregulars who would be unable to cope with the Turkish Janissaries and spahis, but a new Albanian army, trained and disciplined and ready to fight with no hope of compromise with the Turks of whose tactics and wicknesses he was well acquainted.

An army of this kind was indispensable and that is why, as his biographers tell us, during the spring of 1444 he personally went from village to village to explain the significance of military mobilization which was a novelty in Albania, and took part himself in the drive for recruits. He inspected the fortresses, at the same time had them repaired and fortified, took note of the roads over which the enemy might pass and set up a network of informatory agencies to keep him informed of the advent of the Turkish vanguards along the Albanian frontier.

By June 1444 the Albanian army had been organized and was on the alert. At this time, as well as later on, it was eight to ten thousand strong. Some three thousand light cavalrymen formed the pretorian guard that stood always by him. About an equal number of the army were placed under the command of Moisi Golemi and were dispatched to the eastern frontier. The other soldiers were sent by the members of the League and were partly stationed at the fortresses of the country. The Albanian army was composed mostly of peasants and the officers came from the ranks of the nobility. It was equipped with the traditional weapons: swords, spears and bows and arrows. It had none of the heavy artillery and cannons which had been invented at that time.

They did not have to wait long for a chance to engage in combat with the Ottoman armies. In June 1444 an army of the enemy consisting of 25 thousand men crossed the Albanian frontier at Dibra under the command of Ali Pasha. The Albanian army came out to encounter them and on June 29 Scanderbeg pretending that he accepted battle with Ali Pasha's armed forces made a skillful maneuver by retreating, as if defeated until he lured them to the narrow vale of Tervioli surrounded by mountains and forests. Just when the Turks thought they had entrapped the Albanians they found themselves suddenly encircled by the Albanians lying in ambush and were attacked by them from all sides until they were made short work of to the last man.

The first trial was successfully passed at the Battle of Tervioli. This gave rise to a general rejoicing throughout the country. This triumph was reechoed beyond the boundaries of Albania. Through this victory over the Turks Scanderbeg attracted the attention of the European royal courts and in particular that of the Hungarians who, despite the fact that they had come to terms with the Turks at Szeged on July 12, 1444, began preparations for another major encounter with the Turks against whom they hoped to have the support of Scanderbeg with whom King Vladislav had at once struck up an agreement. But it was still too early for the Albanians to dispatch their whole army outside the boundaries at the time when there were still large garrisons in the other parts of Albania. Thus when the Hungarian and the Polish launched their major drive against the Turks in November 1444 and pushed the enemy beyond Varna only part of the Albanian army led by George Araniti marched towards Bulgaria in order to harrass the enemy in the rear. But as every body knows at Varna the Hungarians were badly beaten. As a result of the great losses they had suffered at Varna it would take the Hungarians a lot of time and effort to make preparations for continuing their campaign against the Turks. Thus the Albanians were left all by themselves for some time. Nevertheless they were able to defend their country from two Turkish expeditions directed against

Albania, the first at the battle fought on October 10, 1445 on the Mokra plain and the second at the battle fought on September 27, 1446, at Otoneta in the vicinity of Dibra.

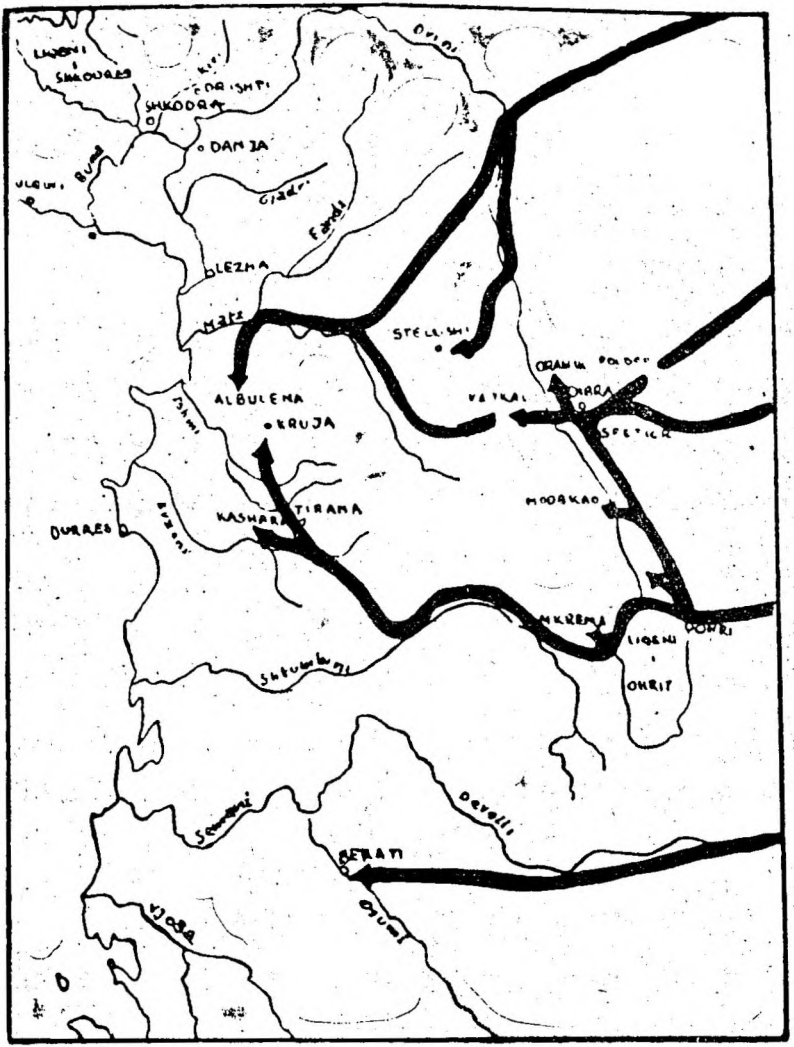
In 1447 the Turks did not molest Albania. But the Albanians wore afflicted by other troubles and this time not from the east but from the west, from the Republic of Venice. The triumph of the Albanians over the Turks which brought about the consolidation of the free Albanian principality and the rise of Scanderbeg's authority began to be a source of uneasiness for the Republic which feared that when he had liberated all the other regions of his country from Turkish domination Scanderbeg might seek to incorporate the coastal towns, which were under Venetian jurisdiction, into his principality. Therefore the Republic intervened in order to undermine Scanderbeg's authority by making use of its usual methods: provocations to sow dissension within the «Albanian League» itself, plots against Scanderbeg and even attempts to incite the Turks against the free Albanian principality.

This hostile policy ended in a declaration of war between the Republic of Venice and Albania in the fall of 1447. The immediate cause for this war was the question of the city of Danja in northern Albania. Lek Zaharia, ruler of Danja and fellow member of the «Albanian League» died without leaving an heir behind. According to agreements concluded at the Lezha Convention the important city and citadel of Danja should be handed over to the jurisdiction of the «Albanian League». But before Scanderbeg could take it over, the Venetians double-crossed him, took the citadel by foul means and stationed a strong military garrison there. The Albanians attacked Danja and the other fortified cities along the coast which were under Venetian rule but were unable to capture them for lack of artillery. The fighting continued throughout the winter. The Venetians stood their ground in the fortresses while all the other regions were taken over by Scanderbeg. The attempt of the Venetians to sow dissension among Scanderbeg's allies gave no great results. The Republic pledged a good sum of money for the head of the

Albanian leader but this too came short of realization. But in the spring of 1448 the Albanians were taken by surprise. A huge Turkish army led by Murat II himself appeared in June in the vicinity of the frontier fortress of Stefigrad (Koxhaxhik) which they encircled with the purpose of continuing their onrush towards Kruja.

The approach of the Turks placed the Albanians between two fires. Certain that his frontiersmen would withsand the assault of Sultan Murad on Sfetigrad, he undertook some speedy action against the Venetians in the district of Shkodra and with the help of the peasant population in arms, defeated them in the Battle of the Drini on July 2, 1448 and reaped a brilliant victory over them. After that he left a small part of his army under the command of his nephew Hamza Kastrioti to keep guard there and he himself set out with the rest of his army for Sfetigrad where he launched a surprise attack to the rear of the Turkish besiegers of the fortress.

At Sfetigrad the Sultan encountered an incredible resistance. The Albanian garrison though besieged offered heroic resistance to the besiegers. To come to the aid of the garrison Scanderbeg harrassed the Turkish army time and again. The Turks made frequent unsuccessful attempts to capture the fort. The resistance of the garrison continued until autumn. The Turks finally discovered the acqueduct leading to the fort and tried to vanquish the defenders of the fort through thirst. Although they finally captured Sfetigrad the Turks did not continue their march on Kruja. The news that Hunyadi had made new preparations for attack compelled the Sultan to hie back to Adrianople to be on the look out against the Hungarians. Scanderbeg on the other hand hastened to conclude a peace treaty with the Venetians on their own terms in order to be free to come to the aid of the Hungarians. The Peace Treaty was signed on October 4, 1448. On the basis of this agreement, Scanderbeg renounced his rights on Danja and the Republic would give Scanderbeg an annual recompensation of 1400 gold ducats. Meanwhile, Hunyadi had set out the head of his army towards the south.



The map: The penetrating roads of the turkish armies and the struggles waged against the Albanians led by Scanderbeg.

Scanderbeg according to agreements with Hunyadi hastened towards Kosova where the Hungarians would be passing in order to harrass the Turks from the rear. But the Servian Despot George Brankovich, a vassal of the Sultan, refused to allow the Albanian army to pass through Kosova, which was under his jurisdiction. Thus Scanderbeg was still on his way when the Hungarians encountered the Turks on October 18, 1448 and were badly defeated by them.

In 1450 the Albanians and their leader had to face another difficult task. Having his hands free Sultan Murad II decided to give a final blow to the resistance of the Albanians who were arousing hopes for liberation among the other oppressed peoples of the Balkans. Having collected his army of about 100 thousand men, Sultan Murad II together with his heir-presumptive Mehmed the Conqueror at their head set out for Kruja at the beginning of May, 1450.

To meet the onslaught of so large an army directed to one single point, Kruja, Scanderbeg ordered general mobilization. All able-bodied men of the principality responded to his call and in a few days an army of nearly 18 thousand volunteers was set up. Scanderbeg divided this army into three groups. About 1500 of them he stationed at Kruja under the able leadership of Count Uran, a brave man of great renown. He himself led 8000 soldiers outside the fortress with Mount Tumenishti north of Kruja as his base for operations against the Turkish camp. He organized the other soldiers into small mobile guerrilla units and entrusted to them the task of laying in ambush along the Shkumini valley with a view of harrassing the Turks on their march to Kruja and of interrupting the march of caravans which would be fetching supplies to the Turks during their stay in Albania.

As soon as the Turkish armies entered Albanian territory from Macedonia they met with traps laid by the Albanian peasants all along the Shkumini valley. All along the way the Turks were compelled to fight in order to defend themselves from surprise attacks coming from right and left and to engage part of their armed forces to pursue

these mobile guerrilla units into the interior only to fall on other traps here and there. Inspite of heavy losses the Sultan and the bulk of his army appeared on May 14, 1450 before Kruja and encircled the fort on all sides.

The war of the Albanians in defense of their capital turned to a real epic, indeed. Inspite of their superiority in numbers and their ruthless devastation of the more fertile regions of the principality they were unable to daunt the Albanian defenders. After a bombardment of the fort in order to strike terror to the defenders, the Sultan proposed to the garrison to hand over the fort without bloodshed. But the defenders said «No !». In the hope of corrupting Count Uran, Murat II promised him a large reward in gold ducats but the commander of the garrison turned the offer down with contempt. Then the Turks launched a bombardment with 600 lbs shells which were a novelty for Albania. Following the bombardment the Sultan ordered a general attack on the fortress. But all his attempts to take the fortress failed. The garrison offered heroic resistance. Scanderbeg harrassed the Turkish army attacking it alternately to the right and to the left causing a lot of damage to it and provoking it to open fire where the Albanians wanted them to, and together with the peasant units interrupted the caravans bringing supplies from Macedonia and Venice. He wearied the Turks and forced them to adopt a position of defense. As the Byzantian chronicler of Sultan Murad II, Laonicus Kalcocondylas, writes «The defenders fought beyond hope and Scanderbeg was ever present whenever his help was needed».

The Turks tried over and over again to capture the fortress by frontal attack but the total war of the Albanians frustrated all their attempts. After four and a half months of unsuccessful siege Sultan Murat II raised the siege on October 26, 1450 and returned to Adrianople at the head of his defeated army, leaving about 20 thousand dead under the bulwark of the Kruja fortress.

The defense of Kruja was a great victory for the Albanians in general and for Scanderbeg in particular. The

The return of Scanderbeg to Kruja, according to an engraving of the XVI century.

victory was welcomed with acclamation both in the country and abroad. The European monarchs sent congratulations through their delegations and messages to Scanderbeg in Kruja for this brilliant triumph.

THE ESTABLISHMENT OF THE ALBANIAN STATE

The general uprising which brought about the liberation of the country and the military victories over the Turks make up only one aspect of the historical turn that the Albanians made under the leadership of Scanderbeg. The other aspect of the turn of events was the momentous political act of the establishment of a free independent and united Albanian State which marked a step ahead in comparison with the former state of feudal chaos. This act was likewise accomplished under the able leadership of George Kastrioti S c a n d e r b e g .

Viewed historically this undertaking was nothing less than the continuation of the social and political process which had been started in Albania during the XIVth century to fuse the smaller local domains into a larger state formation. This trend was in keeping with the feudal economy and first and foremost with the flourishing economy of the cities which made up the basis for the establishment of a united state. But while Turkish occupation hindered the infusion of the separate feudal petty domains into one centralized state, the liberation of the country in 1443 recreated the conditions for the establishment of a national state of the Albanians. The war against the Turks in defense of liberty was of course a factor of importance in speeding up the formation of this State.

This State was established after long lasting efforts and endeavours. In 1443 when the country was liberated the Albanian chieftains squatted down on their domains and continued to hold feudal sway over them. The urgency of a common line of defense against the attacks of the Turkish invaders obliged big and small feudal chieftains to take part

in the «Albanian League» at Lezha. But the «League» exercised none of the functions of a State. It was only a federation of peers who proclaimed themselves allies with equal right. Although Scanderbeg was elected the Chairman of the «League» and Commander-in-chief of the «Allied» army, he had no say in the matter pertaining to their individual domains. He was «pares inter pares», an equal among equals. Each chieftain gave the «League» only pledges to help the war with soldiers and money. They reserved the functions of government over their individual domains for themselves. They kept their armies and forts, their immunity and even their right to secede from the «League» at their own will without any sanctions or other consequences from anywhere.

On a political basis of this kind the war against the Turks which would presumably last long, had very little chance of success. The individuality of the feudal chieftains undermined the strength of the Albanians. Their right of immunity hampered the war. The uncertain stand of the nobility especially at the most critical moments of the war made up a perpetual danger to the rear front of the Albanians and more so when this nobility was utilized and even encouraged by the hostile forces of the Turks and of the Venetians. The chiefs hampered likewise general mobilization of men and material resources of the country essential to the unequal war against the Turks.

The urgency of defensive war made it imperative for Scanderbeg and his collaborators to evercome these internal handicaps and willy nilly to overcome them at the cost of the individual prerogatives of the feudal nobility. This process began after the organization and consolidation of the army. The bulk of the army was recruited from the domains of the Kastrioti. These soldiers were organized directly by Scanderbeg himself and inured in the frequent encounters with the Turks became the most important military power of the country. The ucompromising war and the brilliant successes attained brought Scanderbeg politically closer to the popular masses, especially the rural masses,

who bore the brunt of the fighting. Determined to carry on a total war and endowed with the unbound support of the population of the country Scanderbeg disregarded the privileges and prerogatives of the individual nobles when the interests of the war demanded it. During the military campaign against the Turks he did not hesitate to violate the boundaries of the allied chieftains, to station loyal military garrisons in their fortresses and to take other precautionary measures which violated their right of immunity. Later on, when he felt himself more secure of his power, Scanderbeg began to take restrictive measures against faltering feudal chieftains, to dismiss incapable officers from the ranks of the nobility and to replace them with officers from the rank and file of the population or from the nobility provided they were capable and loyal to their Commander-in-Chief. Moreover he began to divest dubious persons of their feudal prerogatives and turn their domains over to military men of great fame gradually replacing in this way the old aristocracy with a new military aristocracy under direct dependence and discipline to Scanderbeg himself. Thus, thanks to the rise in power of Scanderbeg, the former boundaries of feudal chieftains were gradually being transformed into administrative boundaries and the estates of the old chieftains themselves were being gradually fused into one single state unit. This process led to the formation of the unified Albanian State.

But this process was not to the liking of the nobility who were reluctant to renounce their own personal prerogatives on their petty domains. This dissatisfaction of the nobles increased as the authority of Scanderbeg became more outspoken. Unable to oppose this process the feudal chieftains began to secede from the «Albanian League». The Turks and Venetians took of course advantage of this trend of events. Signs of this secession were observed as early as during the conflict over Danja. In 1450 two of the most powerful nobles, the Aranitis and the Dukagjinis seceded from the League and began to maintain an independent policy by siding one with the Venetians and the other with

the Turks. Later on when the authority of the «Master of Albania» as the people began to call Scanderbeg, became more stable some of the nobility including certain close collaborators of the leader betrayed him openly and joined in with the Turks against their own country. These secessions and worse still these betrayals aggravated the situation of Albania and made the war of the Albanians more difficult. For they had to face the violent attacks of the Turks, the wily provocations of the Venetians and the desperate assaults of the dissident chieftains, at the same time. Regardless of that, however, the Albanians under the leadership of Scanderbeg reaped victory after victory in their epic-making struggle.

SCANDERBEG IN THE INTERNATIONAL ARENA

The early wars of the Albanians under the leadership of Scanderbeg, inspite of the widely proclaimed victories, were entirely of a defensive nature. The truth is that the European States who were greatly interested in ousting the Turks from the Balkans, paid at first no heed to these wars which started with an unexpected uprising in an insignificant country by a people few in numbers, oppressed and lacking a state organization. But the triumphs scored year after year and particularly the epic of Kruja, compelled the European States to stand up and take notice. They thus started to take the necessary steps to approach the Albanians and establish connections with them with regard to the wars against the dangerous Turks.

They found the Albanians ready to negotiate with them. Scanderbeg was eager not to be alone during his later encounters with the Ottoman Turks. Moreover, six years of warfare had devastated the country. During the 1450 campaign especially the Janissaries had burned down houses and had destroyed the grain fields of the peasants en masse. Starvation threatened the people during the spring of 1451. Albania was in need of foodstuffs, of army equipment and

Literary and historical books in different languages devoted to Scanderbeg.

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materials of construction to repair its forts and fortifications. Under the urgent need for military and financial help, Scanderbeg did not only welcome these approaches of the European States but took his own initiative to form an anti-Turkish coalition.

One of the first big powers the Albanians concluded political and military agreements against the Turks with was the Kingdom of Naples. The agreement was signed at Gaeta on March 26, 1451. Alphons Vth of Naples, eager to establish a great Empire on the Mediterranean, took upon himself the task of helping the Master of Albania with military equipment and financial aid to continue to fight the Turks. Whereas Scanderbeg on his part being in need of help and hoping that he would be able to draw the powerful Kingdom of Naples into the struggle against the Ottoman Turks, promised he would become a vassal to Alphons for all the territory of Albania which was still occupied by the Turks and which he would liberate with the participation of the Neapolitan armed forces. But Alphon's aid was far from generous. Only 100 Catalanese soldiers were sent over and even they did not take part in the fighting. Consequently Scanderbeg refused to take the oath of allegiance as a vassal. Thus Scanderbeg had to encounter all the three Turkish expeditions against Albania, in 1452 and 1453, single handed with his own men and he came off victorious in all the battles, again.

Following the fall of Constantinople in 1453 the fury of the Turks became irresistable. Europe was in panic for Sultan Mehmed the Conqueror had made no secret of his intentions to begin his campaign agains Hungary anew. It was clear to Scanderbeg that it behooved the Albanians not to stand on the defensive but to join the other peoples on the offensive against the common foe. But an offensive war required allies and armaments, especially artillery which the Albanians lacked. Delegations were sent to Naples, Rome, Venice and Ragusa from Kruja with a view to securing allies, armaments and financial help. Venice as expected promised nothing. The Pope promised he would give financial aid

but in reality insignificant sums. Naples did not seem to be giving any large aid either. Whereupon Scanderbeg himself went to Naples to ask Alphons to carry out the commitments of the Treaty of Gaeta with substancial aid. Alphons was finally prevailed upon to send troops and artillery to Albania. On his way back from Naples Scanderbeg stopped at Ragusa and reiterated his request for political and financial support to the Senate of the Republic. The Senate gave him a positive reply. It intervened in the formation of a Hungarian-Servian-Albanian Balkan coalition. But the negotiations to prepare a joint offensive against the Turks were prolonged. In 1454 the Turks who had got wise to these negotiations and to prevent them from realization took the initiative and attacked Servia. Hynyadi who was unprepared hurried his Hungarian troops into Servia and dealt a decisive blow to the Turks.

Only after Scanderbeg's persistent demands did Alphons send to Albania in 1455 the help he had promised, about two thousand infantrymen and some cannons. Whereupon Scanderbeg decided to begin his operations to liberate first the Albanian regions still held by the Turks. The first attack was to be directed towards the city and citadel of Berat which would open the road towards southern Albania. The assault on Berat was making headway but it wound up in a disastrous defeat. While the garrison under siege was negotiating with the Albanians the terms of surrender, a huge Turkish army of 40 thousand strong sneaked under ambush and took the Albanians and the Napolitanians by surprise and defeated them.

The Turks had managed to approach unnoticed because Moisi Golemi, the commander of the guard at the frontier, collaborated with them. Dissatisfied with Scanderbeg's policy of political centralization Moisi Golemi had betrayed his trust and had become a turncoat.

The defeat at Berat had aggravated the situation of Albania. Irritated by Scanderbeg's collaboration with its rival, the Kingdom of Naples, the Republic of Venice began its old provocations anew. The feudal chieftains profitted by

Images of Scanderbeg, from various painters.

the occasion and isolated Scanderbeg with a view to speeding up his downfall. Moreover, King Alphons of Naples too, certain that the defeat at Berat brought Albanian resistance to its end, refused further military assistance to Scanderbeg. Thus, Scanderbeg and his Albanians were not only economically and militarily crushed but also politically isolated before the fury of the Turks.

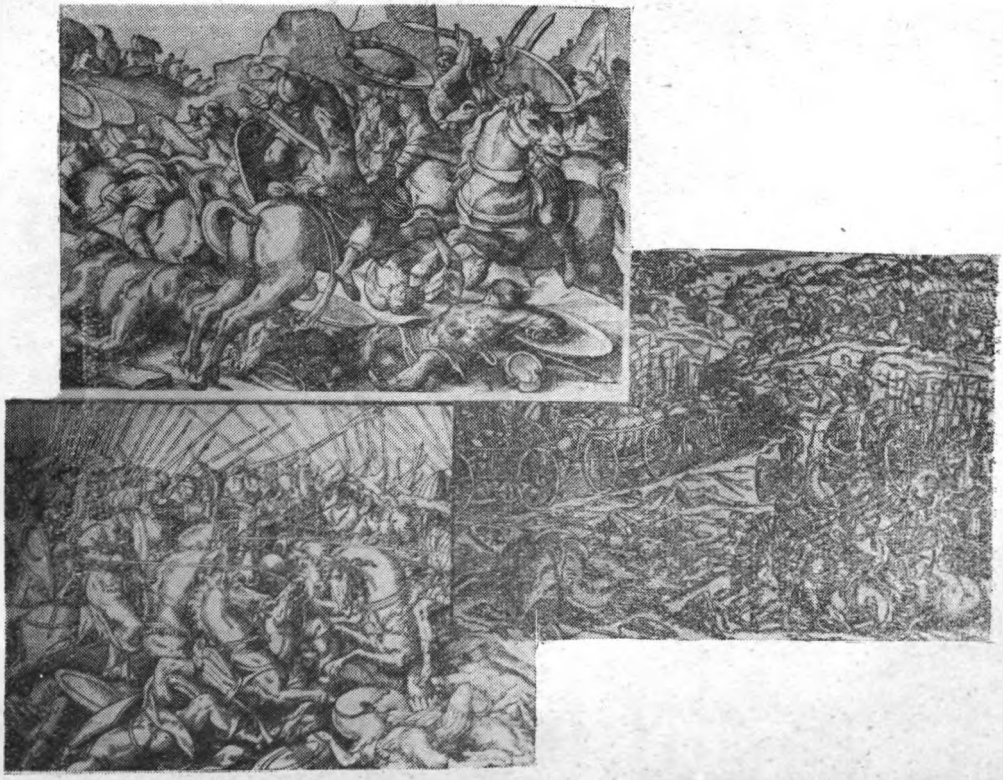
The years that followed the defeat at Berat were most critical ones indeed. The first to try to take advantage of this critical situation was the Turkish Sultan. In 1456 a Turkish army of 15 thousand cavalrymen accompanied by traitor Moisi Golemi attacked Albania, but in the bloody contest at Oranik the Turks were totally crushed. Moisi Golemi fell into Scanderbeg's hands but the latter forgave him. Moisi Golemi stood loyal to the end to Scanderbeg. Inspite of the victory over the Turks other misfortunes lay in store for the Albanians. One of the Albanian leaders, George Stres Ballsha, dissatisfied with his uncle Scanderbeg's policy of centralization, treacherously turned over the fortress of Madrica at the frontier to the Turks. Somewhat later Hamza Kastrioti, Scanderbeg's closest collaborator and nephew, heir presumptive of his grandfather's domains, betrayed him and joined up with the Turks. The death of the glorious Hungarian leader Janosh Hunyadi, which took place in the same year, was another misfortune for the Albanians.

In an almost hopeless situation for the Albanians, a huge Turkish army 80 thousand strong set out for Albania under the command of General Isak Beg Evrenoz and accompanied by Hamza Kastrioti whom the Sultan had appointed Governor of Kruja. Not even this time did the Albanians lose heart. They stood loyal to Scanderbeg even at such critical moments. And it was only because he enjoyed the unlimited support of the popular masses that Scanderbeg could harras the Turks from the end of May to the beginning of September giving them no respite and avoiding all frontal attacks and battles. On the contrary he made them lose track of him and his whereabouts until the Turkish Commander and his nephew came to the conclusion that he had been «done up with» and

that his officers and men had «deserted» him and that he himself had crouched to some mountain fastness in order to «save» his skin. But when the Turks were celebrating their victory over Albanian resistance in the plain of Albulena by Kruja, Scanderbeg took them by surprise and dealt a decisive blow on them and made thousands of them, the traitor Hamza included, captives.

Albulena was a brilliant fresh military victory on the Turks many times superior in numbers. It was at the same time a victory over the wavering treacherous feudal chieftains. It was moreover a victory over the misgivings that had arisen as to the future destiny of the rule of Scanderbeg. Together with the valorous Albanian fighters the hero had come off victorious through incomparable difficulties. They won the unbounded admiration of the entire world. The victory at Albulena raised the prestige of the Albanians and their chief in the international arena more than at any time before.

Scanderbeg received messages of praise for this victory from the European courts. Together with his praises and title of honor Pope Calist III invited Scanderbeg to take part in the great Crusade which he would organize against the Turks. In the 33 appeals which His Holiness directed to the other princes he urged them to become «Scanderbegs». But the preparations for the Crusade took time to make. Pope Pius II who succeeded Pope Calist III was more active in getting the Crusaders ready and had greater hopes in the participation of Scanderbeg who after the death of Hunyadi had become the most popular champion of the anti-Turkish war of liberation in Europe. At the Congress of Mantova which was convened in 1459 for the purpose of deciding about the Great Crusade the name of the brilliant Chief of the Albanians was mentioned with praise by many participants to the Congress. In the war plan drawn up at this time Scanderbeg was entrusted with the important task of attacking the Turks on the central front. But preparations for the Crusade were slowed down by the feudal contradictions of many leaders who were not very earnest in undertaking



Engravings of the XVI century, showing the battles of Scanderbeg with the Turks.

it. Meanwhile, whereas they talked at leisure about the Crusade, the Turks continued to send other expeditions to Albania and the Albanians continued to fight against the Ottoman Empire. Awaiting the preparations for the Crusades which would apparently take time to make and in order to give his people an opportunity to recuperate and improve to a certain extent the economy of the country which had been maimed by war Scanderbeg accepted the Sultan's offer and concluded a three year armistice with him in 1460.

During the armistice the country had somewhat recuperated. But Scanderbeg did not stay idle. Taking advantage of this occasion he went to the assistance of his ally the King of Naples. At Naples King Alphons who had died in 1458 had been replaced by his son Ferdinand. The Napolitanians had taken up arms against the new King in favor of an Anjou for the crown of the Kingdom. Scanderbeg was eager that his old Ally's son should come off victorious in this civil strife. He therefore accepted Ferdinand's invitation to come and help him. Scanderbeg set out for Italy with a part of his light cavarly in 1461 and arrived there during the most critical moment for Ferdinand. In Italy Scanderbeg reaped two victories, one at Barletta and the other at Trani, and helped Ferdinand suppress the revolt and consolidate his tottering position as ruler.

Upon his return to Albania in 1462 he found the situation here critical again. The preparation for the Crusade had not yet been completed. The Republic of Venice uneasy about the consolidation of the alliance between Albania and Naples began the old game of inciting the dissident nobles against Scanderbeg. Sultan Mehmed II in his attempt to prevent the Albanians from taking part in the Crusade sent three expeditions in succession to Albania. But as usual the Albanians led by their hero defeated all three expeditions within one month in the ruthless battles of Mokra, of Pollogu and of Livadi.

But inspite of these victories the isolated war of the isolated and tired out Albanians against the powerful and furious Turks was full of risks. In order to gain time until

the preparations of the Crusade were completed, on which the Albanians had placed their hopes for a final expulsion of the Turks from the Balkans, Scanderbeg accepted the peace offer of Sultan Mehmed the Conqueror. A ten year long cease fire agreement was signed in April 1463.

Alarmed by this cease fire agreement the organizers of the Crusade exerted pressure on Scanderbeg to rebegin the fighting with the Turks. At first Scanderbeg refused. But when the Venetians began to make preparations to fight the Sultan lest Turkish naval power increase and assured Scanderbeg of military and financial help and drew up a treaty of Alliance with the captain of the Albanians, and when the Pope proclaimed the beginning of the crusade in November, Scanderbeg was persuaded and rebegan his war against the Turks towards the end of November, thus supplying a source of encouragement to the crusaders.

But the crusaders did not set out against the Turks on account of contradictions within their ranks and when Pope Pius died in August 1464 the Crusade failed altogether. With its failure the Albanians were again left in the lurch against the infuriated Sultan of the Turks. But the Albanians were, nevertheless, not dishearted. Determined to make their supreme sacrifice under the leadership of Scanderbeg, the Albanians wrote the most heroic pages of their legendary and unmatched epic, during the years that followed.

THE APOGEE OF THE ALBANIAN EPIC

The Albanians faced the fury of the Conqueror all by themselves in one of the most critical moments of their history. In 1464 the internal situation of Albania was lamentable. The country was devastated. Its economy continued to be bad. Its population had been reduced partly through the war and partly through emigration to foreign lands. The plains and fertile fields had been mostly abandoned by the people who, terrified by the merciless avenge of the Turks,

had sought shelter in the less fertile mountain regions of the interior. The menfolk capable of bearing arms were especially reduced in numbers owing to the long and exterminating expeditions of the Turks. Hopes for relief from abroad were very scanty indeed. The failure of the crusade had had a general demoralizing effect on the European peoples and countries. The west European States in general showed no interest in the Balkans though their own destiny was at stake right here in the Balkans too. The Italian States were split by feudal antagonisms and gave no heed whatsoever to what was happening in Albania, although its occupation by the Turks would open the way for Sultan Mehmed the Conqueror to cross over to Italy. The King of Naples, Scanderbeg's ally, was ever so weak and he never bothered about helping the Albanians with troops and supplies. Pope Pius II's successor Pope Paul II was very stingy and always complaining that the Vatican's coffers were empty and never promised any help to Scanderbeg. The Albanians relied only on Venice for help since Scanderbeg had struck up an agreement of a political alliance with them in 1463. But this alliance was far from being a sound one. From the bitter experience of twenty years the Albanians had learned not to rely too much on the Republic which might come to terms with the Sultan at any moment. Besides, the Republic neither gave any great help itself (it had only promised 1000 infantry troops and 2000 ducats for 1464) nor did it tolerate the Albanians to solicit help from other powers which were its rivals.

Inspite of these disfavorable circumstances the Albanians never faltered. Gathering around their able and experienced leader as usual they faced the expeditions of the ferocious Turks with heroism.

In 1464 Sultan Mehmed II sent only one expedition under the command of Sheramet Beg against the Albanians. This 14 thousand strong army, like the other armies sent before, was totally exterminated in the vicinity of Ohri in August of the same year. But the following year, in 1465, they sent five expeditions one after the other against the Albanians.

Their objective was clear: to lay waste the whole country, to wear out Scanderbeg's army and to demoralize the Albanian population with the hope of giving an end to the long resistance of the Albanians. The Sultan placed Ballaban Pasha, one of the most renowned soldiers of the Ottoman Empire, at the head of these expeditions. But all the five expeditions shared the same fate as the others before them: They were defeated one after the other the first in April, the second in June, the third in July whereas the fourth and the fifth in August.

The victories of the Albanians and their captain who directed all the battles himself were brilliant; but the losses they incurred were undoubtedly great and irreparable under the existing economic conditions of the country. Over and above all the fields were laid waste and the Albanians started the winter under the impending threat of starvation.

The Albanians spent a winter of extreme privations and could hardly survive till the spring of 1466. But in June when the empty grain cribbs were about to be refilled with the summer harvest Sultan Mehmed the Conqueror and Ballaban Pasha, assuming that the conditions were now mature to give a final blow to Albanian resistance, set out for Albania at the head of the entire imperial armed forces of 150 thousand men.

All this great mass of soldiers moved along like a huge avalanche in a narrow strip of land like the principality of Albania and devastating everything and killing everybody they found on their way. But the history and events of 1450 were repeated this time too. The peasants withdrew their families from unprotected areas and laid traps for the Sultan's soldiers all along the way. According to the Turkish choniclers themselves the Ottoman army was compelled to wage ruthless wars all along the way and to pursue the Albanian bands deep into the mountainous hinterland only to encounter incredible heroism. The Albanians preferred to die fighting rather than give themselves up alive. «When they were pursued by the Turkish soldiers», the chronicler of the Sultan, Kritobulos of Imbrosi, wrote, «and finding no

way out the Albanians threw themselves down the cliffs and perished».

Finally the Sultan succeeded to lead the bulk of his army before Kruja and to lay siege to the fortress. Scanderbeg had left a small garrison in the fortress under the command of Tanush Topia, whereas he himself and the rest of his army remained outside. Just like 16 years before the Kruja garrison offered heroic resistance to the assaults of the enraged Turks. After two months of unsuccessful attacks and continuous annoyance from the rear by Scanderbeg the Sultan took part of the army with him and departed from Kruja leaving Ballaban Pasha behind with orders to continue the siege with the hope of forcing the garrison to surrender for lack of food. To protect his rear Sultan Mehmed the Conqueror set up a strongly fortified citadel and named it Ilbasan and in the fall he left Albania for good.

Inspite of Scanderbeg's attacks from outside, the Turks maintained the siege on Kruja throughout the autumn aggravating the state of the garrison. The Albanians were exerting themselves to the uttermost, unaided, without weapons and without provisions. In December Scanderbeg himself went to Rome and in January to Naples in order to persuade Pope Paul II and Ferdinand to send urgent effective aid to Albania. The masses of the people in Rome gave Scanderbeg, dressed like a modest knight, a reception worthy of a glorious captain. The speech he delivered before the Roman Consistory left a deep impression. But the stingy Pope glistening in the gorgeousness of cardinals and splendor of cathedrals gave Scanderbeg an aid of little significance. Just as insignificant was the aid which his thankless ally Ferdinand of Naples gave him.

Nevertheless, the Albanians and their leader Scanderbeg never lost heart. Under the leadership of the Albanian hero they scored another brilliant success in the spring of 1467. In April they intercepted and put out of action a Turkish army that was coming to the help of Ballaban Pasha; some days later they made short work of Ballaban Pasha himself and raised the long siege of Kruja.

But in July 1467 the entire Turkish army with Sultan Mehmed II at the head made another onrush on Albania. A bloody encounter took place at Buzurshek near Elbasan with great losses on both sides. By scoring a victory here the Sultan thought he had given a death blow to Albanian resistance. But at Kruja he encountered again the unbelievable resistance. Besieged for the third time Kruja put the Conqueror of Constantinople to shame again. Three weeks later the Sultan departed and a little later Scanderbeg and his men liberated the glorious Capital again.

During the third siege of Kruja the unequal Albanian - Turkish war reached its highest apogee. But the Albanian had paid very dearly for their brilliant and unparalleled victories. The numerous and continuous sacrifices had dried up the inner resources of the principality which apart from having been demolished had also been reduced to hard-pressed straits otherwise. Hopes for relief from abroad were very feeble indeed. Further more the enemy enraged by 25 years of defeats mounted watch at the portals of Albania ready to jump upon it at every moment and carry out fresh outrages.

To get fresh forces and means together, Scanderbeg decided to make a fresh appeal to the country, especially to the nobility who had stood aside. To attain this end he thought of reviving the 1444 «Albanian League» and invited the chieftains to an All-Albanian Convention to be held at Lezha in January 1468. At the Convention Scanderbeg solicited military and financial help from the chieftains to carry on the fighting against the common enemy. In the meantime another Turkish army was heading towards Albania in mid-winter in the direction of Shkodra. Scanderbeg as usual got ready to go at the head of his army to face the enemy. But this time the hero had contracted malaria fevers and was unable to mount his steed. Languishing in bed with high fevers his sturdy but wearied body was unable to recover from illness and while the Albanian army, which had gone to war without their commander, a thing which they had never done so far, scored another brilliant victory in the

vicinity of Shkodra, George Kastrioti Scanderbeg breathed his last on January 17, 1468 at Lezha with a career of eternal glory to his credit.

The sudden death of Scanderbeg gave rise to general mourning throughout the country. In their immortal hero the Albanians lost the gifted organizer of the uprising which brought freedom to the country, their distinguished political statesman who founded the independent Albanian State, their far-sighted strategist who made them reap inconceivable victories over enemies greatly superior in numbers.

Scanderbeg's death was a cause for deep regret outside the boundaries of Albania as well. The peoples of Europe lost in him the gifted captain of a small country who had been their shield in checking the furious onslaught of the Turks against them, their most outstanding guide to urge them to wage total war on the Ottoman Empire.

In this sense George Kastrioti Scanderbeg occupies a place of merit not only in the history of Albania but also in the mediaeval history of Europe. A proof of this lies in the unparalleled echo of this great leader's exploits throughout the subsequent centuries both in the country as well as abroad. After the hero's death the Albanians continued to fight in his immortal name and example and safeguarded the freedom of their country. It was only after their fourth two-year long siege (1476-1478) that the Turks could finally occupy Kruja. They were unable to occupy Shkodra even when they threw almost the entire armed forces of the Empire against it. It was only when the Venetians had handed over to the Turks by agreement the city of Lezha in 1506 and Ulqini in 1571 that the Turks were able to occupy Shkodra, whereas the mountainous regions of the interior were almost never occupied by them. The armed resistance of the Albanians against the Turks was kept up throughout the period of Turkish occupation. Scanderbeg's name was always a source of inspiration in this age-long resistance and war of liberation. The name of the hero was made immortal in popular tradition, his brilliant exploits became legendary and were transmitted from mouth to mouth, from generation to

generation among Albanian rural and urban families. Albanian writers dedicated their best productions to him. During the epoch of national revival in the XIXth century the hero's name became the watchword of all the Albanians in their struggle for the liberation of the country from the Turks and for the re-establishment of the independent Albanian national State. Scanderbeg's name continued to be remembered among the Balkan peoples as well. According to some Slav folksongs «Brave Scanderbeg is not dead», he lives forever and is always ready to fight for them. The hero's name was a source of inspiration for the Balkan peoples even in modern times, during the period of their national wars. Many literary and historical works dedicated to George Kastrioti and published during the XIXth century bear indisputable evidence of this. His name and exploits were re-echoed in no less degree in the various other countries of Europe. Hundreds of books in the various languages of Europe have been written since the XIXth century to the present time about the Albanian hero who died at the height of his glory without a single stain of defeat to his name.

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CONTENTS

— Introduction 3
— Albania and the Albanians 6
— Turkish occupation of Albania 9
— George Kastrioti Scanderbeg 13
— The general uprising (1443) and the Lezha Convention (1444) 15
— The initial triumphs of the Albanians (1444-1450) 19
— The establishment of the Albanian State 25
— Scanderbeg in the international arena 28
— The apogee of the Albanian epic 34
— Bibliography 41